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## ABSTRACT

The National History Day Program (NHDP) is designed to promote student competency and interest in carrying out original research while improving student achievement and critical thinking skills. Students select a topic, conduct research, and prepare a presentation for regional, state, and national competitions. The present research focused on active learning and the NHDP and took the form of in-depth interviews. A high school teacher who had been involved with the program for nine years was interviewed, as was one student, a high school junior, who was involved with the program for the first time. The teacher and student participated in three 90-minute interviews of which this paper presents selected highlights. Among other findings, it is reported that both the teacher and student expressed highly positive feelings about their experiences with the NHDP. (DB)

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Active Learning and National History Day

In-depth Interviews: A Pilot Study

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### Method

My topic is active learning and the National History Day Program (NHDP). The purpose of the NHDP, which involved over 300,000 students in 1989, is to promote student competency and interest in carrying out original research while improving student achievement and critical thinking skills. Students select a topic related to an annual theme. They then find, analyze, interpret and organize data, relate the data to an historical context, and develop a presentation on that topic in one of four areas: paper, group/individual project, group/individual media, or group/individual performance. Depending on how successful the students are at regional and state competitions, the program lasts from six to nine months and culminates in state winners competing at the national level, in June, at the University of Maryland.

I interviewed one high school teacher who has been involved in the Program for nine years and who last year had national winners. I also interviewed one student, from a different school, who was involved in the Program for the first time this year (1990). She is a junior in high school. The teacher and student participated in three, ninety minute interviews. The first interview - Historical and Biographical - concentrated on the participants' backgrounds up to the time of their involvement in the NHDP. The second interview - the Present - focused on the details of the participants' experiences in the NHDP. The third interview - the Meaning - asked the participants what their experiences in the NHDP mean to them.

In terms of my topic, I have selected the most pertinent parts of

the interviews. Ellipses indicate edits of repetitions, pauses or words.

The student's words are in italics.

### In Their Words

#### The Present

It means a lot of work because I'm right in the middle now of getting kids ready for state competition. It means dealing with students on a different level instead of, you know, just a teacher in a classroom situation. You get to meet with the kids on a one to one basis which I love, really enjoy doing. . . . I would say that getting to know some of these students and seeing their developments, their growth in a lot of different areas is really extra special as a teacher because that's what you're working towards.

I've always been a teacher who felt the best way for students to learn is to get totally involved and, you know, whether it's through group activities where the kids are doing hands on projects or something. . . .

*I like art. . . . It's fun. It's not like the normal class where you just sit down and you have to learn something. You get to do something. . . . I took art last year and I'm taking it again this year and next year. I don't know. It's fun . . . and this year I took drawing and painting. That was fun cause um . . . she took one of the skeletons from the science room and we drew the skeleton so we could learn about the bones and stuff. . . . It [surrealistic painting] was neat. I did this city and it had a unicorn flying over it and lightening was coming out of his horns onto the city. It was great (laughs). I was so proud of myself. . . . If you're drawing something from your imagination . . . you know, you can just, oh ya, it's supposed to look like that (laughs).*

History to me has always been interesting because there are so many aspects. It's so complex. You have to take it all apart - a particular event - take all the factors that cause it to happen, then put it together again so you can see that overall picture, and I always enj . . . liked puzzles, . . . It's always nice when the kids finally can see that whole picture from the separate parts and not just try to memorize facts without making any connections or anything.

The difficult thing with teaching a survey course is that you're sort of locked into covering a certain amount of time and it is very difficult to focus on any one topic for any length of time . . . and so you deal with things so superficially, that the kids don't really have a good understanding of the cause and effect . . . and so they don't retain it as well, because

they don't really understand it. . . .

To me, that is the best part about History Day - students refine and refine and refine which never happens in an ordinary classroom. You do a [research] project, you pass it in, you get a grade and it gets back to you and that's the end of it.

*I'd rather do this. Research papers . . . are boring. I hate them (laughs). Well, a research paper - it's just, you know - just a bunch of words and there are so many rules in the English language about what you can write and what you can't. . . . Well, I don't do a lot in school. . . . I don't like any of the classes really. . . . Well, you just sit there and they tell you something and then they give you a test and you tell it right back to them. Everybody has the same answers (laughs) on the test if you did it right.*

#### Backgrounds and Other Interests

*I was like hyper kid (laughs). I ran around all the time. I climbed trees and just ran around all the time . . . and I used to swim too. We lived kinda near a pond. It was within walking distance so I used to swim all the time in the summer. . . . I didn't care, I played outside in the rain and everything until my mother dragged me in. I didn't like to sit in the house.*

[In the] neighborhood there were a lot of children my age and we were always outside playing something whether it was pick up softball game or hide and seek or, you know, all those children's games that you play, ah, paper dolls and play school and we were always doing things that used our imagination. We'd make our own fun. We didn't have a lot of games and things like that. . . . That was really wonderful. . . . I think it really developed our imaginations. So, I remember being very active that way. It wasn't sitting in the house. We were always busy doing things.

*I love my horse. He's the best thing. . . . He thinks he's a person. . . . He's seven years old now. He was never taken away from his mother so he thinks he's a baby too. . . . And, um, I call him Chatter because he wiggles his lips like he's trying to talk. . . . I used to do some jumping. I used to lease a horse and I did some jumping with her but the lease ran out and she wasn't up for lease again after that because she was getting older and, um, she died in September. . . . And my horse now, he's young. He doesn't know how to jump yet, so we're going to be competing, competing just, um, in a beginner's course.*

*I think the band's been my favorite [activity] anyway in school. . . . You meet a lot of new people. I met endless people - just the other kids and all the different instructors. . . . I mean it was something new and really different that I'd never done before. . . . In the beginning, it was*

*hard. I didn't know how I got myself into that - practice - tromping back and forth and getting hot and sweaty and being thirsty like all the time and just exhausted - I mean, after practice - just exhausted for the rest of the day . . . just had to sleep. And, um, after awhile, it paid off with competitions and stuff. Everything came together. I like competing. If I tried hard, I liked competing. Like one or two of them I didn't really try and, I mean, we did good, but I didn't feel as good about it because I knew I didn't try as hard as I could have.*

I do remember I was extremely involved in extracurricular activity. . . . See I went to a small high school. . . . We had to do everything, because there were so few of us. So, I mean, I wasn't that terrific an athlete, but I did play softball and I did play basketball and participated in other activities. And we had a girl's athletic association and I became President of the, ah, High-Y Program run through the school and the YMCA. . . . I just enjoyed all those things.

When I was in high school, I did want to work with children. . . . I was thinking more of being a Y director and when I first took courses . . . I was actually taking courses in phys ed. . . . I left school at the end of two years. . . . At that point in time, that's what I really wanted to do was get married and have a family. . . . Like I said, I had left to get married, I had my four children, got a divorce and then knew that I would be a working woman. . . . When this happened, my mother talked to me and she said, "You know, I always felt bad you didn't finish school. Would you think it would be possible for you to do it with the children and everything?" And I said, "Gee, I don't know if I could handle the work and then still raise a family," because I had children - when I started back, I think my children ranged in age from thirteen to a year and a half. . . . Well, it took me about six or seven years, I think, to do this on a part-time basis.

My husband, my ex-husband at the time, was not supportive of me doing this. In fact, you know, he kept on saying, "Why don't you go out and get a job if you're going to do this?" My family was very supportive and my children were quite cooperative. My oldest child's a girl which helped a lot, because she, you know, was old enough to help me and I think that's why she said she'd never change a diaper again after that. She practically had to raise the youngest one.

#### History Day and The Meaning

*The teacher and the other teachers decided that the whole, that everybody was going to have to do a project for the History Day. It counted as a test grade, so we all did one and had a, you know, a little presentation in the library. So we did the fire department. . . . Both of us knew people in the fire department - her Dad and . . . my boyfriend, the fireman*

*and um, so we did it on [name of town] firefighting. And it wasn't, it wasn't really that hard because everything's still down there that they had from the beginning. They have all the log books and there's a lot of people around that knew how it started. . . .*

We always joke about the fact that History Day is a misnomer and it really should be History Day, not History Day, but History Year, because it is a year long activity. Well, we start usually about the end of September because this is about the time we assign our Fall semester projects for our history classes. . . . I make it an optional way of doing a research project for the Fall. They can either do this, do a family search or do a traditional research paper. . . . I usually give them approximately three weeks to come up with a proposal - ah, what their topic would be. We look at what the theme is for that particular year, discuss what would be entailed, what they really have to focus in on.

*Our schedules are totally different (laughs). It was hard getting the time to spend on it together, so through most of it we divided it, like you know, you'll do this and I'll do this, cause we just didn't have time to spend together with it. . . . But, um, it was easier doing it together I think. . . . Now we don't have to do a term paper. . . . I was going to do a term paper, but I just said, "Naaa" (laughs). . . . Term papers, they're pretty boring and this is fun. You get to go out . . . and you can just do it however you want. You know, it's just how we can do what we want really with it. You can come up with your own ideas and try to learn, like, the most about things.*

The fact is they have an ownership on this. . . . It's really theirs, cause they've invested so much in it. Even when you do a research paper, how many research papers are done in one week or one night for a lot of students, but not this. . . . [When] they present this, this is them they are presenting. This represents what I'm all about, and they take pride in that because they come to understand that, and it's very hard too in that sense that sometimes if they don't win, it can be very, very difficult to handle for them. . . .

We have had tears which can make you feel very embarrassed. . . . It is, for some people, it is a very emotional time because they have invested so much of themselves into this. And it's very hard on your self-esteem especially for someone that age. It would be difficult for an adult who had invested that much time and energy into something and not to win, especially if you feel yours is just as good as somebody else's. . . .

*We came in second in our division. . . . I mean we had been up, like, practically the whole night before. Oh, we gotta do this and we gotta do that, you know, before, in getting ready for it, and, um, we were just so exhausted at the end, we didn't care if we won or lost. We just wanted to get out of there and go home (laughs).*

Oh, you feel absolutely wonderful, you really do - especially if it's someone that has really worked hard and has really grown, not only academically but you can see character, you know traits, character traits that you can see, have really improved. . . . It gives some students so much self-confidence, especially if you see somebody come out of their shell. . . . And, you just see them and they're just so proud and you're just as proud of them as they are. . . . For some of them to say, "I didn't believe I could do this. This is wonderful. I just, with all that competition, I can't believe I've won," . . . . And that is just a wonderful feeling, you're so happy for these kids.

*I think it's fun. I had a good time. . . . I kinda learned I'm a real competitive person. . . . I mean there's so many different ways you can say things . . . when you think about it, cause you can just do so many different things to get your point across.*

[At the National competition] they get acquainted with kids from other areas of the United States doing the same things and having some of the same problems . . . and attacking that type of activity. And I've had kids who've gone away to college and come back and said, " . . . my roommate participated in History Day the same year I did and he was at Nationals and we didn't even know each other. Isn't that incredible?" And knowing how to go about doing something that requires that much research and ability to present that information in an entertaining and informative and, you know, accurate manner . . . so, it gives them that experience of having done that before.

### Conclusions

#### What I Have Learned about In-depth Interviewing:

1. In-depth interviewing is time-consuming and can be tedious.
2. The interviewer has to develop good listening skills.
3. The interviewer has to be flexible enough to follow unexpected directions the interview might take.
4. Analyzing data is slow.
5. Transcribing data is slower.
6. The interviewer needs decent recording equipment.
7. You can learn a lot about a person in an in-depth interview.
8. Interviewing a teenager is quite different from interviewing an adult.

What I Have Learned about the Interviewees and History Day

1. Two people's experiences in the NHDP are positive, but I don't know how much I can generalize from these experiences.
2. The student dislikes rules.
3. These two people are very active, like competition, and like being with other people.
4. The student does not like school as a whole.
5. The teacher uses the NHDP as a supplement to the regular curriculum.
6. The teacher uses the NHDP in honors classes only although anyone in school may enter the Program.
7. The student wishes more of school were like the NHDP.
8. The teacher wishes she could do more in school using the NHDP as a model and has incorporated parts of the Program into a new course.
9. It is a lot of work for the student and teacher.
10. The teacher and student feel good about themselves in relation to the NHDP.

Questions

1. If this Program meets the needs of teachers and students, why doesn't it become the curriculum instead of a supplement to it?
2. Do lower ability students enter this Program? If not, why not?
3. What parts of this Program can teachers incorporate into the regular curriculum?
4. Once students develop presentations how are they used in the classrooms?
5. How do teachers evaluate the presentations?